The history of afterlives

About: Patrick Boucheron, *La Trace et l'Aura. Vies posthumes d'Ambroise de Milan (IVe-XVIe siècle)*, Seuil

by Miri Rubin

Ambrose of Milan, fourth-century theologian, administrator, bishop and eventually saint Father of the Church, left his mark in the history of the Church and beyond. Patrick Boucheron explores his life and afterlives, in a dialogue between then and now, writing a history to live by.

What is a life? What is an afterlife? How do the dead inspire living? These are some of the questions raised by Patrick Boucheron in his latest work, the fascinating and challenging *La Trace et l'aura*. The life he has chosen to explore, to find both astonishing and intriguing, is that of the fourth-century theologian, administrator, eventually saint Father of the Church—bishop Ambrose of Milan (*c*.340-397). The *traces* he uses are Ambrose's own works of scholarship and polemic as well as memorials created by the contemporaries he inspired: a basilica and a vast body of hagiography, not least the life by Paulinus of Milan. And as to the *aura*, it glowed as Ambrose was remembered, remade in Milan and elsewhere by men of action, who sought in him inspiration and justification for political change.

The author and his subject

Patrick Boucheron is Professor at the College de France, and he has chosen as his sphere within that institution, the history of (systems of) power in Western Europe between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. He is always insightful in about religion, but his questions are at heart political ones: How is political authority projected and sustained? How are systems of rule transformed? How are people moved to collective action? He has spent most of his research attending to the civic institutions of Italian cities, particularly of Milan. He has been drawn in particular to the ways power and authority are projected, exploring the design of public spaces, and ambitious building projects—*grands travaux*. But Boucheron is also interested in individuals and the concepts which became attached to them, by the aura that glows from them, arises from traces of their lives.

Ambrose glowed for several generations and repeatedly when freedom was at stake. Boucheron is particularly eloquent as he evokes the crisis—or opportunity—of 1447-1450. At the death of the old duke of Milan, Philippa Maria Visconti, in August 1477 without an heir, an inspired group of humanists and civic leaders, imagined the city living under an imagined 'Ambrosian liberty', as an Ambrosian republic. Milan may have been an early commune but it had also been long ruled by princes, assertive ones—longer than Florence of Siena. Now a band of brothers were moved to believe that it could be done, 24 captains and defenders of liberty combined to rule the city in 1448, and did so until the princes reasserted themselves with the support of a vast coalition.

Aura and Authority

Ambrose was born in 340 in Augusta Treverorum—modern Trier—to a family of high-ranking administrators. His was a Christian family of scholars and bureaucrats at a time of vast change. Since the days of emperor Constantine (d. 337), living as a Christian had become licit, its central tenets having been established in the Nicene Creed, which emerged from a council over which the Emperor had presided. It was now possible to be both Christian and privileged Roman without fear or confusion. This period of transition saw the conversion of Roman elites, and with it the entry of highly educated and socially exalted men into church leadership and administration. Young Ambrose acquired the education open to men of his class in Rome, with rhetorical training at its heart, and went on to a shining career. First he served as governor of Liguria and Emilia—what we might call greater Lombardy—with its administrative hub at Milan. Milan, already an important Christian centre, was riven by the doctrinal polemic which divided Christians, as between Arian Christianity which denied Christ's parity with God the Father, and the Nicene version with its emphasis on the equality and co-eternity of Christ within the Trinity. To be a Christian public servant was to participate in these debates. There was no place to hide. So Ambrose found himself drawn into Milanese ecclesiastical politics them when the Arian bishop of Milan died in 370. The people of Milan—so we are told—sought solution to the strife in Ambrose, a renowned orator and virtuous Christian, as their new spiritual leader. This was not the life Ambrose had envisaged, and he pushed back in spectacular acts of resistance, which included alarming displays of debauchery. Yet he finally relented.

Some of you will have already been reminded of another bishop and future saint, who struggled with his destiny in the world between spirit and flesh: Augustine of Hippo. Indeed, this African Father of the Church, pioneer of Christian political theory, and creator of the genre of Christian autobiography is alive in this book. After a turbulent youth and young adulthood, drawn to Manichean Christianity, he was attracted to the life of as scholar within a family, before he abandoned that all to become bishop and theologian. After his arrival in Italy, and on a mission to Milan, Augustine heard Ambrose preach, and that moved him to embrace leadership of a church beset by challenges from all parts. Orator touched by orator.

Ambrose's oratory made scripture see so much more than Augustine had ever considered. With his gift for allegorical interpretation, the Bible became so much more than a series of stories which held little interest for the philosophical minded; it was full of ethical promise and challenged the mind with its deep wisdom. Such was Ambrose's approach to the biblical heritage of the sacraments: 'this is my body' was far more than a physical gesture, it was the promise of salvation through grace.

Performing Charisma

It was indeed necessary just then to harness rhetoric with the aim of creating a new human condition—one of Christian becoming. The never-modest Augustine was both humbled and inspired by Ambrose, in a manner that brings to mind a concept that Boucheron chooses not to invoke, Max Weber's, *charisma.* Charisma is the power to change lives, or better, to make lives even more alive. That is what Ambrose did for Augustine. And memory of him did at particular moment across the centuries for others, too.

Patrick Boucheron is particularly fascinated by the performative awareness displayed in Ambrose's leadership. We have noted his bodily excesses that followed the call to become bishop; once he became bishop, and attracted those who sought his advice and instruction—

like Augustine indeed—he used another performative mode: silence in the face of tumult. Ambrose perfected the eloquence of silence, a quality made so meaningful in the solitude of desert dwellings and rocky caves by early Christian solitaries and hermits. He brought it into the hubbub of one of the busiest cities on the Roman world—Milan. Steely in his privileged self-knowledge he refused to become a consoling advisor to struggling Christians, or indeed an enabling courtier to Emperors. On occasion he clashed with them, emphasising the separation of spheres of authority and ecclesiastical dignity, the earthly and the spiritual, never to be confused.

The spiritual sphere was one of true belief expressed and reinforced by liturgical action, at once spiritual, sensory, and intellectual. Patrick Boucheron rightly emphasises the importance of Ambrosian liturgy both as *trace* and as a feature of Ambrose's *aura.* The liturgy of early Christianity had necessarily been limited by its situation in homes, its exposure to censure and even persecution. Ambrose seized the potential grandeur of liturgy, which could compete with imperial rituals, indeed which appropriated some of its features. Think of his famous hymn for Advent, *Veni creator spiritus*, in which he applies the rhythms which accompanied the entry of Emperors into cities to the coming of Christ. Ambrose saw the church as a parallel empire of sorts, whose management and action were equally to be informed by the highest intellectual reflection, exacting ethical commitment, and the powers of persuasion inherent in rhetorical excellence.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Ambrose was so very definite in his judgements, even once he was installed on the episcopal *cathedra*. He knew theological right from wrong, and spoke his opinion to those in power. He was willing to clash with Emperor Theodosius I in his traditional treatment of the Jews within the Roma Empire where they still enjoyed freedom to worship. But when the synagogue at Callinicum (today's tormented Raqqa) was to be rebuilt, he made the distinction: tolerating existing synagogues was one thing, allowing a new one to be constructed was another. There is a different approach here from the one that Augustine was to develop, for Augustine was intrigued by the meaning of the genealogy that bound Jews and Christian, even if he also believed—as Ambrose did—that the Jews had rejected the true Messiah.

Ambrose was at his most confident when judging human sexuality. To him was abhorrent the mingling—*admixtio*—between the sexes, the intimate confusion of distinct categories, bodily fluids. Hence his admiration for virgins, and the greatest virgin of all, the Virgin Mary in her unsullied body. His legacy for future generations of male and female religious was realised in his powerful writings about Mary. It was her purity, her lack of mixture, her definite virtue that enabled salvation to come into the world as a God made human. Yet he also created bridges between entities, as in the antiphonal chant he invented, probably in 386, difference aligned, not mixed but juxtaposed—Ambrosian chant.

History to live by?

Patrick Boucheron is a dedicated public intellectual. All his work is informed by a rich dialogue between then and now, or rather then in the now. He displays here throughout a deep literary sensibility too, and it interacts most fruitfully with his subject—Ambrose—a master of rhetoric, a writer of poetical prose. Boucheron is a writer of history to live by, and armed with Walter Benjamin's distinctive sense that history only exists in the here and now (*Jetztzeit*). Ambrose's posthumous lives were realised in fifteenth century Milan, as it inspired and moved people to act. Boucheron therefore leaves us with our question: Who will we allow into our lives, as we band together to seek our own *libertas*, to realise our own republics? For this we must truly be grateful.

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